

SIEC Alert #22 February 1997

## *Telling Children About Suicide*

After there has been a suicide or suicide attempt in the family unit, the first impulse of many parents or caregivers is not to tell the children. This is often done in the belief that children need to be protected from the truth, that they are too young to understand what is happening (Webb, 1993: 139; Hoff, 1995: 228; Smolin & Guinan, 1993: 106). However, the literature does not support this belief; in fact, the experts strongly recommend that parents or other caregivers **DO NOT LIE**. The reasons for this are:

- Children are expected to tell the truth; they should be able to count on the adults in their life being truthful with them. Children are quite capable of seeing what is happening around them - they will know something is wrong when older siblings and adults are grieving or a family member is no longer present (Hoff: 228-229; Fitzgerald, 1992: 131).
- When you begin with a lie, trying to decide whether or not to keep up the lie (and how to keep the lie going) becomes a preoccupation (Fournier, 1991: 98; Dunne-Maxim et al, 1987: 241) which can interfere with normal grief.
- The child may find out the truth about the suicide in less than favourable circumstances, e.g. being taunted by schoolmates (Fitzgerald, 1992: 61).
- Lies create an atmosphere of distrust (Webb: 139; McCue, 1994: 9; Dunne Maxim et al: 241; Hewett, 1980: 70; Wagner et al, 1990: 3). This is especially true if the child was aware of prior suicidal behaviours (Hewett: 70; Hoff: 229). If a child realizes they have been lied to about the suicide, they may begin to wonder if lies are being told about other things.
- Not telling children the truth may lead them to believe, through magical thinking, that they are somehow responsible for the suicide (Webb: 138; McCue: 11; Sedney et al, 1994: 290; Dunne-Maxim: 242; Hewett: 73; Fitzgerald, 1994: 144). Without the facts, children may attempt to fill in the details alone - they can imagine things far worse than the truth (Webb: 140; Hoff: 228; McCue: 11; Sedney: 289).

No one can be prepared for a suicide. When a family member has died because of suicide, it can be difficult for the adults to be sensitive to the children's needs. The parents' immersion in their own grief can cause a child to feel abandoned at a time when their need for a stable parental figure is greatest (Smolin & Guinan: 101, 110). It is vital that children maintain a sense of security during a loss (Fitzgerald, 1992: 82).

(Thanks Laurell & Joyce for your help)

### **Some Suggestions for Helping Children who Have Been Bereaved by Suicide**

- **BE HONEST.** Tell the child that the death was suicide. Use explanations appropriate to the child's age and cognitive development (Hoff: 228; McCue: 185). Talk with the child, rather than at them or to them (Wolfelt, 1992: 17).
- Create and foster an atmosphere in which children feel comfortable asking questions and expressing emotions. Pay attention to what the children are saying, verbally and non-verbally (Hoff: 228; Grollman, 1990: 63).
- Allow children to see your grief. By protecting children from grief, they are denied the opportunity to learn how to master painful experiences (Wagner et al: 3).
- Be prepared to answer the same questions again and again.
- Be ready to give constant reassurance to the children that they are loved. Let them know that the suicide was not their fault (Hewett: 78).
- Explain that there are ways other than suicide to solve problems (Hewett: 71; Smolin & Guinan: 107).
- Resume normal routines as soon as possible (Dunne-Maxim et al: 243).
- Do not hesitate to seek professional help if you are concerned (Fitzgerald, 1992: 63).

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## SIEC Resources\*

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